

Spec. Coll.
PETERBORO, September 3d 1859.

To the Religious Newspaper Reviewers of my recent Discourse,

Pardon me for including you all in one address. As you are to be counted by scores, and as I am always under a heavy burden of labors, I cannot find time to answer you separately.

A few, though unhappily but few, of my Reviewers have written in a kind and unexceptionable spirit. Unfeigned and heartfelt is their sorrow both over me and over the injuries, which they believe I have done the cause of truth. I thank them, and I hope to profit by them.

Some of you make fun of me and my Discourse, and seek to bring down the public scorn and contempt upon both. This seems to me to be out of keeping with your christian professions. For the Discourse is on subjects of the deepest and most solemn interest: and if it is as full of blunders as you say it is, you doubt not that it is as full of earnestness also.

Most of you review *me* rather than my Discourse: and you do it in ways that, if not intended, do nevertheless tend, to have it read either not at all, or through the film of prejudice. This I deeply regret: for I am very desirous to have it read extensively, and read in the light of its own, instead of its author's real or supposed, character.

Some of my reviewers of this last class pronounce me weak, and others pronounce me insane. This does not disturb me. Some of them parade my changes: and this, I confess, does disturb me. For the practice of disparaging and ridiculing men because they change is of very evil influence. I have always lamented the prevailing disposition to set down as a weakness and fault the willingness to change. In my judgment it is far better to do what we can to lift men up to that high level of courage and integrity where they will feel free to experience changes and avow them, than it is to flatter and strengthen their cowardly habit of shrinking from the reproach of changing their opinions and relations. I confess that I have been compelled to undergo frequent changes. Some of them cost me much self-denial, and some of them much suffering. Nevertheless I do not regret them. I could not be honest and avoid them. I could not resist the demand for them, and yet grow in sincerity, in simplicity, and in Christ. Little more than forty years ago I was guilty of gambling. To give it up was a good change. So too was it a good change when between thirty three and thirty four years ago I gave up strong drink. Thirty years ago I was weaned from political parties; and only a few years after I was weaned from ecclesiastical parties also, so deep became my sense of the sin of dividing the disciples of Christ into sects. These were blessed changes from the trammeling and shrivelling spirit of party to the soul-expanding freedom of the truth. Quitting the Colonization Society is one of my offences in your Reviews. But how could I avoid this change? Slavery was the horror of my childhood. William Jay (noble and dear man!) says in his book on this Society, that I am the only immediate abolitionist belonging to it. I cannot remember the day when I was not one. It was to promote the immediate and unconditional abolition of slavery that I joined the Colonization Society. Hence when I found that it opposed emancipation unless accompanied by expatriation, what else could I do than quit it? I had to change my relations that I might maintain my principles. By the way, these declaimers against change are quite apt to confound the giving up of a relation with the giving up of a principle. But often is it the case that because we will hold fast to a principle we have to break up one relation and enter into another. The inward must be preserved at whatever expense to the outward. We must change in order to remain unchanged.

One of my reviewers (see the Christian Intelligencer) in order to excite prejudice against my Discourse refers to the fact that I was baptised by immersion. This is to set all but the Baptists against my Discourse. The same reviewer says that I keep "the Jewish Sabbath": and this is to set all Christians against it.

I fear most the effect of the N. Y. Independent's Review. For whoever believes that my mind is as eccentric and my judgment as weak as it represents them to be, will not think it worth while to spend one moment in reading what I write. It holds me up as foolish enough to believe that I could be elected Governor last Fall: and this too, though in a whole County into which I would go to present myself as a candidate I could not find one man willing to vote for me.

The friends of Freedom and Temperance have repeatedly nominated me for Governor and President. I usually put the boldest face on the matter; call loudly on the people to vote for me; and even practice the great immodesty of voting for myself. But I never supposed that any one attributed to me the expectation of being elected. I thought every one was aware that I value my nomination not because it may result in my election, but because I can avail myself of it to inculcate, both lipwise and penwise, principles which are as precious to me as they are unpopular with the masses. Oh no, I cannot be so simple as to expect the election of an Abolition and Temperance ticket in this State so long as not one Religious Newspaper in the State goes for it, nor one Temperance Newspaper except the true little sheet in Syracuse. The Temperance Press of this State would have people talk for Temperance but vote for Rum. With few exceptions Religious Press of this State prates for Christ, but prefers political expediency to his principles. I may be ignorant of Christ; and I surely am if he is with these great parties that vote rum tickets and proslavery tickets, and not with the little handful who believe that earnest friends of Temperance and Freedom are alone fit to be civil rulers.

Another means of the Independent for convincing its readers that they must not mind any thing I say, is its charging me with the folly of trying to convert "shiftless young men and indolent and inexperienced men of color into hardy squatters" upon parcels of wild land. For the last forty years I have had more to do with wild land in this State than any other man in it—having in that time given away or sold seven or eight thousand parcels of it to as many persons. Surely then I must be a fool if after all this experience I still do not know what qualities are essential to the successful occupation of wild land. Yes, I must be a very great fool if after my long land-life and my father's long land-life, I can be enlightened at this point by a Religious Newspaper Editor—by a man who has probably never sold, nor given away, nor owned one foot of wild land. I would add that the Independent is mistaken in supposing the gifts in question to be conditioned on clearing and cultivating. They are all absolute. The Independent may not see, nevertheless my experience does, many ways in which a poor man may be helped by being made the owner of land, even though he shall never occupy it. Such ownership may increase his self respect. It may give him access to the ballot-box. The care of watching the timber and the taxes upon it may be useful to him. The sale of it may benefit him.

Another of the ways of the Independent for bringing its readers to treat my productions with neglect and contempt, is its imputation of eccentricity to me. Eccentricity is a great calamity. It is very disagreeable to me. To believe myself the subject of it would make me unhappy. I hope I am not eccentric in dress, nor manners, nor modes nor expressions of thought:

and I am not aware that my family or neighbors think I am. I was never suspected of eccentricity until I stopped drinking rum. Then for the first time I was called a queer fellow. But since then millions have stopped drinking rum, and I have of course ceased to be queer at this point. Excepting my going to bed at nine and rising at five out of which the Newspapers make so much sport, I know of no remaining grounds for calling me eccentric save that I never allow myself to vote for any man who knows a law for slavery, nor for any man who recognizes the sacred rights of property in intoxicating liquors when offered for sale for a beverage. But the refusal to vote for such men is a logical conclusion instead of eccentricity: common sense, and not a crotchet: and were the person on trial other than myself, I should call such refusal the normal action of a sound mind instead of the whim of a queer one.

I am truly sorry that the Independent thinks it necessary to hold me up as so eccentric, and as so weak in judgment. It is a Newspaper of very wide circulation, and very wide influence—not to say very wide authority. Many will believe that all this which it says of me is true; and of course they will not care to read what such a crazy simpleton writes. I readily admit that this charge of eccentricity and this impeachment of my judgment are a very cunning and effective device to prevent the reading of my Discourse, and to deduct from its influence on those who do read it. Nevertheless is there fairness, is there justice, is there the ingenuous spirit of Jesus in the device?

It strikes me Gentlemen, that those of you, who treat my Discourse with levity and contempt, and make it little else than the occasion of misrepresenting and ridiculing myself, have fallen into a great mistake. You cannot annihilate what is going on around you simply by turning your back scornfully upon it. The fast-growing intelligence of christendom has at last made up an issue between a progressive and a conservative religion; between the religion of reason and the religion of authority. This issue is not to be ignored: it is not to be evaded. Do what you will to the contrary:—slander and ridicule earnest men to your heart's content; take on what airs and affect what superiority you please—this issue will nevertheless push itself into notice. It will command the public attention, and occupy a large share of the public thought. Condescend then, I beseech you, and without any further injurious delay, to enter the lists, and to bring to the discussion all that earnestness, sobriety, sincerity, and modesty which become men, and which characterize christians.

You prize the bible. I know not that you think it to be in danger. Very probably you regard it as quite safe in virtue of your own conceited and overrated defence of it. If however you do think it to be in danger, you think it to be so, not because of yourselves but of others. I do myself think it to be in danger—but in danger only from yourselves and the class you represent. If this book of wisdom and salvation shall be rejected, then will you and that class—you and those who with you claim it to be the supreme and final authority—be responsible for the rejection. Intelligent men, when disabused of their early and false education, refuse to acknowledge any other authority than that of the Great God speaking to them through their reason. Hence is there danger, if you shall persevere in overriding their reason with the authority of the bible, that they will reject not its authority only but itself also. But if you will consent to accord to reason its proper office in religion as well as elsewhere, then you may be sure that the bible will be safe, and that even by those who would otherwise reject it it will be prized as a source of enlightenment to human reason unequalled by any other or all other books.

Since I began this letter the late Speech of Senator Davis of Mississippi, in which he so elaborately defends slavery, has come under my eye. It painfully illustrates the superstition of going to the bible to learn whether the greatest crime against man and therefore against God is right or wrong. Mr. Davis finds authority for slavery in a few angry words which fell from what he calls the "inspired" lips, but from what I call the yet *drunken* lips of Noah.

The bible does not test slavery. Slavery tests the bible. If the bible says slavery is right, that does not prove it right. It only proves that the bible is wrong. Whether slavery is right or wrong is to be decided by reason. A small measure of reason will suffice to condemn it. Whatever is most abstruse must also be passed upon by reason;—by real reason I mean, and not by the passions and prejudices which men are so wont to confound with reason. Moreover, the reason in this case must not be an unexercised, ignorant, dull reason, but enlightened by heaven and earth, by the bible and other sources of instruction and inspiration. But it will be said that some men have not this enlightened reason. Then let them go to work to get it:—for they must know that not the bible, nor the priesthood, nor the church, nor any thing else can be a substitute for reason. No authority whatever must be allowed to usurp its place.

What could the mass of abolitionists, who cling to the superstitious notions of the supremacy and final arbitrament of the bible, do in an encounter with Mr. Davis? Nothing. For they hold that slavery is a question of words—of bible words it is true—but still a question of mere words:—and Mr. Davis with his learned skill can beat them in philology, logomachy, and exegesis. But even the most unlettered abolitionists if untrammelled by these superstitions would be an overmatch for him. Their free-playing reason and common sense would quickly demolish his arguments.

A miserable man is he who will let it turn on a book whether he himself, or whether indeed any other person can be rightfully reduced to slavery. Man must maintain the nature his God has given him: and no book is from God which tells him to surrender that high nature, and sink into a chattel.

GERRIT SMITH.